

Panhandle Health District

8500 N. Atlas Road Hayden, Idaho 83835
www.phd1.idaho.gov

Nurses Start Babies on Firm Foundation

By Cynthia Taggart
Panhandle Health District

Hayden—Sam Moore was just shy of his second birthday when his brother Isaac arrived. Isaac was tiny and needed constant and generous nurturing for a good start to life. Rather than allow the needs of the two little boys to overwhelm them, parents Justine and James Moore opened their door to a Home Visiting Nurse from the Panhandle Health District (PHD).

Theresa Hylsky, R.N., arrived at the Moores' door with medical skills, parenting experience, a list of helpful community resources and understanding.

"My mission is to provide young families with information I didn't have when I was 22 and a new mom," Theresa says. "It makes it easier for them, less stressful, good for the baby, promotes brain development and builds a foundation for future learning. It's one big happy package."

PHD's Public Health Nurse Home Visiting program offers parenting support and education at no cost for anyone who needs it. The health district, Idaho Children's Trust Fund and Panhandle Public Health Foundation support the program with funding.

New parents often bond with nurses during pregnancy. When the baby arrives, nurses are constant support as parents learn what to do with the new little person in the family. But nurses stay behind once families leave the hospital.

Family and friends are enough support for many new parents, particularly if their baby is healthy and their lives are in order. But that support is absent in some families. Health and money problems, immaturity, family discord or a baby with health problems can push new parents to the breaking point if they can't find help.

The Home Visiting Program is an extra serving or two of nurse attention designed to reduce stress and start the new baby in a positive environment.

Some parents call PHD on their own to schedule a nurse's visit. Friends, family, social workers, hospital discharge nurses and child protection authorities often refer new parents to the program after they see the stress parents are under and the challenges new babies face.

The nine Home Visiting nurses divide their time among the five northern counties. A home visit lasts as long as 90 minutes and nurses visit many families twice. After the home visits, nurses stay available to families by phone for up to three years.

"I tell them, 'I'm your personal public health nurse,'" Theresa says, smiling. "I don't disappear after two visits."

For the Moores, Theresa first assessed the family's equilibrium. How was the pregnancy and delivery? Did Isaac have a pediatrician? Did Justine and James have family support nearby?

Theresa checked Isaac's developmental progress and his weight. She helped the Moores trade an old child safety seat for one that meets all safety requirements.

"She gave us lots of new resources we didn't know about," says Justine.

Theresa explained about the value of immunizations and taught Justine and James to recognize Isaac's needs by his body language. Theresa identified the milky coating on Isaac's tongue as a yeast infection—thrush—and told the Moores what medication would take care of the problem.

"We didn't know what it was," says James. "That was definitely helpful. And that was cool about being able to tell what he wants by his expressions and body language."

In five years, the program's nurses have visited nearly 700 families. Theresa has held babies that tested positive for methamphetamines and babies with severe developmental disabilities. She has advised teen mothers with one foot still in childhood. She has counseled drug-abusing parents to quit drugs and continued to advise them after child protective authorities remove their babies to foster care. She has taught parents to put their babies in a safe place and walk away when they're frustrated. She has encouraged parents to trust their instincts.

"When instinct tells you to pick up your baby, follow that instinct," she says. "I tell families, 'You already know a lot of this.'"

Theresa remembers being a first-time parent at age 22.

"I had no clue. I've thought many times how differently I would have done things if I'd known what I know now," she says.

She approaches each family with that thought in mind. She has skills, experience and resources to share. She can strengthen families and raise their confidence with education. The Home Visiting nurses offer a safety net that often changes lives.

"Where many of the families are now is not where they are going to be in five years," Theresa says. "We can teach them now how to promote their baby's brain development and help ensure those babies start with a secure foundation."

For more information on PHD's Home Visiting Program, call Theresa Hylsky at 415-5100.